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SUBJECT: Niger: National Council for Political Dialogue Proposes
Increase to Size of National Assembly; Opposition Boycotts Meeting

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11. Summary: The National Council for Political Dialogue (CNDP) convened on August 26 to discuss issues related to the announced October 20 legislative elections (Ref B), and adopted a proposal to increase the size of the National Assembly. Most opposition parties shunned the meeting. End Summary.

12. The CNDP meeting primary agenda item main was the adoption of a proposal to establish a "national list" (meaning at-large list) of thirty (30) new seats in addition to the existing 113 seats for the various constituencies. This will raise the number of National Assembly seats from 113 to 143. Under the new plan, political parties participating in the next elections will present two lists - a list for constituencies from which 113 Deputies will be elected, and a "national list" of 30 candidates whose seats will be apportioned according to "a prorated estimate of each party's cumulative results at the national level."

13. The rationale behind the adoption of a "national list" was to "ensure a good representation of the country's population" of 14.3 million, at the rate of one Deputy per one hundred thousand people, as provided by law. The proponents of the "national list" also estimated that 50 percent of the former National Assembly Deputies were illiterate, or did not understand French, the country's official language and the National Assembly's working language. The "national list" presumably will be required to comprise a maximum of cadres to upgrade the institution's competencies. According to Minister of Interior, Public Security, and Decentralization Albade Abouba, the acting CNDP chairman, during popularization of the new constitution (Ref F) citizens expressed the desire not only for an increase in the number of National Assembly seats, but also to adopt a national list that would help raise the legislative body's overall level of education.

14. The issue of registration fees to be paid by candidates was raised during the CNDP meeting. On August 21, the Council of Ministers set "electoral fees for legislative elections at CFA 100,000 (\$200)" per candidate. The majority of the political parties found this amount too high and proposed the fee be set at CFA 25,000 (\$50).

15. While a few opposition parties such as the Nigerien Party for Self-Reliance (PNA) and the Party for National Unity and Development (PUND) attended the CNDP meeting, key parties like the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS), the Social Democratic Convention (CDS), the Nigerien Alliance for Democracy and Progress (ANDP), and the newly-formed dissident Niger's Democratic Movement (MODEN) that make up over 50 percent of the dissolved National

Assembly, and several parties of the "non-parliamentary" opposition decided to boycott the meeting. Opposition parties maintain they do not recognize the August 4, 2009 constitution, and therefore cannot participate in any election based on, much less attend a meeting relating to, the new constitution (Ref D).

¶6. Before the CNDP meeting, a group of civil society organizations supporting President Tandja's continuation plan denounced the opposition's rejection of the new constitution, and asked Minister Albade about action the GON intends to take regarding the opposition's claim that it would reinstate the August 9, 1999 Constitution, the dissolved National Assembly and Constitutional Court. Albade said that the GON will deal with "whoever defies the constitution." He stated that "pretending to reactivate those institutions is like trying to bring back a dead person to life." The group further asked the Minister if and how authorities will manage an anticipated, imminent visit of ECOWAS envoys. Albade responded that "they will be received with the welcoming hospitality Niger extends all its guests of honor... However, they better clean their doorsteps before making any suggestions about the situation in Niger."

¶7. Background: The CNDP, which was created in 2004, is a formal national framework for continued dialogue within the Nigerien political class, in order to establish the much needed social and economic stability for successful elections and sustainable development in Niger. All political parties (majority, opposition, non-affiliated) are represented. CNDP members commit themselves to build sustainable consensus on questions of national interest and democratic principles of governance. In 2004, the National Movement for a Society of Development (MNSD), the main party of the ruling coalition, proposed a "national list" in order to upgrade the National Assembly's overall instructional level and its competencies. The PNDS appeared favorable to the project while the CDS and several other parties rejected it. The plan was ultimately

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abandoned without further explanation.

¶8. Comment: The CNDP's current proposal may have ulterior motives. Some analysts see it as a move by President Tandja to reward some Tazarce supporters who cannot otherwise win elections in their constituencies, or who lack other resources to obtain a ticket to the National Assembly. The "national list" of thirty Deputies would be beneficial to the President, consistent with his authority to appoint one-third of the Senate, as well as the Cabinet, a majority of the Constitutional Court and High Council of Communication members. Critics say that only the President of Niger should be elected at the national level. Moreover, adding 30 more Deputies to the National Assembly will further strain the country's budget. End comment.

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